

THE POETRY OF JEAN JANZEN: A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

Laura Schmidt Roberts*

Abstract: This essay explores theological themes and imagery in the recent work of Jean Janzen by considering poems from an as yet unpublished manuscript *Tasting the Dust*, the first section of which is a collection of poems about the San Joaquin Valley of California. I will focus on three poems from the first section of *Tasting the Dust*: "Claiming the Dust," "In Tule Fog" and "The Mountain." In these poems Janzen's identity as a San Joaquin Valley poet and as a Mennonite/Anabaptist poet is most visibly intertwined. The experience and geography of the valley become powerful imagery for expressing theological themes from her ethno-religious tradition.

" . . . THIS HARD EARTH NOT OUR FINAL HOLDING PLACE AFTER ALL . . . "

At a poetry reading in the Fresno Art Museum a student asked Jean Janzen whether she intentionally included verbs in so many of her poem titles.¹ Indeed, the sense of movement that emerges in the titles of many of Janzen's poems is a defining characteristic in the theology of the poems as well.² "Claiming the Dust" demonstrates this theme strikingly, dominated as it is by images of motion and change, especially in relationship to the earth and people.

* Laura Schmidt Roberts is a faculty member of the Division of Biblical and Religious Studies at Fresno Pacific University, Fresno, California.

1. "I Keep Forgetting," "Holding Back," "Burning Apricot Wood," "Curbing the Appetite." — Jean Janzen et al, *Three Mennonite Poets* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1986). "Potato Planting," "Questioning the Cold," "Reclaiming the Land," "Eating Stones," "Flying With the Light," "Singing Yourself to Death," "Driving in Fog." — Jean Janzen, *The Upside-Down Tree* (Winnipeg: Henderson Books, 1992). "Identifying the Fire," "Dividing the Night," "Going West," "Finding the Pearl," "Looking for the Soul." — Jean Janzen, *Snake in the Parsonage* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1995). Her unpublished manuscript "Tasting the Dust" continues in this tradition: "Claiming the Dust," "Listening for the News," "Looking at Nilsson's *Being Born*," "Beginning Again," "Getting it Right," "Reading the Fields," "Raising the Dust in Siena," "Tasting the Dust."

2. See, for example, "Sometimes," "Postcards To My Sister" (*Three Mennonite Poets*), "Double Rail," "Reclaiming the Land," "River," "One for the Road" (*The Upside-Down Tree*), "Women of the Cloth," "Home," "Looking for the Soul," "Photographs of the Wild" (*Snake in the Parsonage*).

CLAIMING THE DUST

Like nomads we come
to this subtropical valley,
our borrowed space
under the sun. Once
an ancient lakebed,
the July ground powders
under our feet, lifts
in puffs to welcome us.
The children rise, then
run out to pound acorns
under the oaks, calling
to each other from
their rings of stones.
Pale bird-of-paradise leans
out of its gravely bed.
It takes dynamite to plant
an orange tree, our neighbor sighs.

This is our new home,
this valley's layered clay
which offers its sunbaked surface
to the scuffing of our feet,
as if our fragile lives
are enough to rouse the ages.
The slightest breeze, and the dust
becomes skittish, whirls
to settle in the next yard.
But mostly, stillness,
so that the beige siftings
are almost imperceptible.
Fig leaves in a talcum haze.

It is the night we finally learn
to claim. At dusk the children
float their sheets like flattened tents
and sprawl face-up into the warm
darkness, and we join them
in this rehearsal – a summer
night travel, the sky's black
curtains pinned back with stars.
That open stage.
This hard earth not our final holding
place after all, but the air
into which we sail,

breath by dusty breath,
toward a different shore.

— *Poetry*, 166 (July 1995), 201-202.

Janzen introduces the earth initially as space borrowed by nomads who come to the valley. This space is not static, whether in regard to its history or its present state. Rather, the substance of this space, the dust of the earth, is dynamic. It has layers of history that mark its journey, from ancient lakebed to dry dust. The dust itself is figured as nomadic, puffing and whirling at the slightest breeze. It will leave the yard of one new home for the next, not seeming to notice, particularly, to whose borrowed space it supposedly belongs. The "beige siftings" may be almost imperceptible, but they occur nonetheless. Granted, not all of the earth is so easily moved ("it takes dynamite to plant an orange tree"), but the abundance of orange trees in the valley bears testimony to the fact that even the hardpan can be changed. This world of borrowed space is a place of change where the earth is moved, whether by wind, feet or dynamite.

Movement is characteristic of the people in the poem as well. Figured as nomads, whose lives consist of moving from place to place, their latest move is to the new home of "this valley's layered clay." However, Janzen makes clear that this borrowed space does not mark the end of the journey. The people are nomads in a more elemental sense. At night, with their faces directed not toward the hot, dusty earth but the warm, dark sky, the journey's end becomes clear. The face-upward sprawl is figured as rehearsal for the final move from the holding place of this earth to the "distant shore."

At least two theological convictions inform the images in "Claiming the Dust." First, the portrayal of both the earth and the people as nomadic implies a view of creation as mutable rather than constant.³ In Christian scripture and theology the mutability and finiteness of creation is sometimes presented as a contrast to the constancy and infiniteness of God and the eternal.⁴ God, however, does not appear as a point of

3. This view is present elsewhere in Janzen's work. See, for example, "Temperature of Cruelty," "To My Aunt Dying in Autumn" (*Three Mennonite Poets*); "Osprey," "How It Looks at You" (*The Upside-Down Tree*); "Looking for the Soul," "Movement of Vaulted Chambers," "In November" (*Snake in the Parsonage*); and "Saskatchewan Harvest" — Jean Janzen, *Words for the Silence* (Fresno, CA: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1984). On occasion Janzen contrasts the relative age or permanence of aspects of non-human creation (mountain, granite, river) with the transience of human life. However, in such poems the movement or change of non-human creation is at least implied. See, for example, "Czar" (*Words for the Silence*), "Note To Conrad Grebel From Mt. Pilatus" (*Three Mennonite Poets*).

4. See, for example, Thomas Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 2:407-30 and Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (San

comparison in "Claiming the Dust." What develops in the poem is not the difference between creation and God, but the contrast within the created order between humanity and the rest of creation. For Janzen, humanity shares the mutability of the created order, but with a different end result.

This difference stems from the second theological conviction present in the imagery, that this world is not, in the end, home for humanity ("This hard earth not our final holding place after all"). In "Claiming the Dust" humanity moves and changes, as does the earth itself, but humanity journeys ultimately to leave this world for the next, "breath by dusty breath," in a way that the rest of creation apparently does not.⁵

This notion of life as journey from this world to the next is prevalent in Mennonite/Anabaptist theology.⁶ Anabaptists have always felt a strong sense that this world is not home for the believer. Yet coupled with that belief has been the equally firm conviction that the life lived in this world is of the utmost importance; the kingdom of the world to come has broken into this world, and the faithful must live as citizens of that kingdom here and now.⁷ The result is a profound tension between yearning for that final home and yearning for the land that is home for now.⁸ Both of these longings are present in "Claiming the Dust," as the nomads inhabit their "new home" and in so doing are also reminded of the final journey that awaits them.⁹

Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 72-103. This contrast relates to the distinctions in essential nature between Creator and creation. Delineation of these differences has long been a topic of discussion and debate in systematic theology.

5. Janzen is largely silent, here and elsewhere, on the fate of the rest of creation.

6. See, for example, Paul Erb, *The Alpha and the Omega* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1955), especially Part III; Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, 1:135-76; Harry Loewen, "The Anabaptist View of the World: The Beginning of a Mennonite Continuum?" in *Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural and Literary Essays Dealing with Mennonite Issues*, ed. Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1981), 85-95; "Eschatology," *ME* 5:247-48. Since this conviction is a central aspect of eschatology, the prevalence of articles on eschatology in North American Mennonite confessions also bears this out. See Howard Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith in North America* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1985), 36, 43-45.

7. See, for example, Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, 99-115; Robert Friedmann, "The Doctrine of the Two Worlds" in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy F. Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), 105-18; Gordon D. Kaufman, "The Mennonite Roots of My Theological Perspective" in *Mennonite Theology in the Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1996), 1-19.

8. See, for example, *Visions and Realities: Essays Poems, and Fiction Dealing With Mennonite Issues*, eds. Harry Loewen and Al Reimer (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1985), 9-10; Calvin Redekop, "The Mennonite Romance with the Land," in *ibid.*, 83-93; Waldemar Janzen "The Great Trek: Episode or Paradigm?" *MQR* 51 (April 1977); 127-39.

9. See also Janzen's "Wild Grapes" (*Snake in the Parsonage*).

“ . . . WALKING OUT WE JOIN IT, OUR HAIR AND BREATH
BECOMING ONE WITH THE PAST. . . .”

The idea that the coming kingdom has broken into this present reality implies that the other, eternal world may be experienced in the here and now. This conviction informs the imagery of “In Tule Fog.”

IN TULE FOG

It rises from the fields
like an ancient seabed
come back from the dead,
and hovers. Walking out
we join it, our hair and breath
becoming one with the past.
We're fish again, finning
through a millennium risen
for us, to cushion us,
to slow us for new sounds.

And she being born into this
diffusion, heaves from one float
into another — her mother's arms.
Her pulse flutters
in quick rhythm against
the slower, steady one.
And surrounding them both
is this rising of the ages,
as though she is not really new, but
fresh to us — given, so we can press
against our cheeks the wonder
of that time, or no-time,
from which she came, to which we go.

The fog itself (typical of the valley in winter) seems to function as a figure of timelessness or the eternal. In walking one encounters not merely fog, but the past resurrected from the dead. In the fog, time has collapsed. The hovering of the fog is perhaps the first great hovering over the waters; there is devolution and we are back at creation (“we're fish again”). Or perhaps the “finning” image is that of the womb, of floating cushion and muffled sound. Either way, present merges with past, producing images of death, resurrection, creation, new life. We join the fog of the resurrected past, if only with our hair and breath. Likewise, the birth of the child in this poem is an encounter with the eternal, and she too is somewhat ethereal. She floats, she flutters. In

pressing our cheeks to her we experience not mere flesh but "the wonder of that time, or no-time, from which she came, to which we go." It is as if she comes with eternity still on her, her body not yet having had the chance to get in the way.

These two images of encounter with the eternal reveal a tension between the tangible and the ethereal. Føg and child are tangible, physical realities, tied to this world. Yet for Janzen these become two occasions when we experience the other, eternal world.

The journey imagery is present again, but here Janzen has cast it in the arena of time rather than space. The child has come from "that time or no-time" and we go to "that time or no-time." It is as if she, and we, appear in this world for a window of time but are connected to eternity before that appearance and after it. We journey from this time toward "that time or no-time," as we journeyed from this hard earth toward a distant shore in "Claiming the Dust."

“ . . . WHERE IS HOME? . . . ”

In "The Mountain," Janzen moves back and forth between valley and mountain, using a mixture of images that communicates ambivalence: both places are home, yet neither is home.

THE MOUNTAIN

From their cool, shaded rooms
we carried our children into the sun's glare,
past the burned hills,
and into the immense canyon.

We lifted them, pointing.
The river roared, battering
and shining in its swiftness,
and the walls it had made through

millennia stood taller than the world.
This is home, we said,
but they couldn't hear us.
Not until we carried them

back into their safe beds
did our voices enter them again.
Sleep, we whispered,
and stepped back into

our own solitudes, spaces
that couldn't hold us now,
but vibrated outward without end.

In spring the first slopes
are lacy with snowdrops, lupine, and fiddleneck
in a wild band of curve and curl —
the whole field bending
to lure us up and into the mountain's
huge embrace, up to the silence
of a high meadow's chilled nightfall,
the sudden precipice, and its white peak
like the *Sanctus*, overhead.
Over its granite lap, the mountain
has made a bed for us all,
pine-fragrant with dew gathering
for our lips, a place we had only
imagined until we entered like a child.
For the mountain calls the child,
the one who awakens early, who hear
the small sounds of seekers beside the streams.
In the silence of dawn, the rustled of leaves
where the chickaroo leaps, the cracking
of seeds, the jay's blue streak.
No one sees him turn his back to the campground;
he doesn't hesitate, but follows
the source, pumping his arms in a run
before he pauses to turn back,
and discovers he has lost his way.

Where is home?
Is it this magma cooled and lifted,
the rocky ledge where poppies cling,

the roaring river cutting in,
and the peak with its icy distance
and sustenance?

Or is it our ancient valley seabed
 which the mountain feeds,
 where cotton bolls thicken and vines

swell with grapes?
 Grace and necessity, the endless paradox.
 Hungry, we open our mouths and arms,

and there, over the other's shoulder
 we see the mountain, its craggy peak crowned
 and waiting, even when it is hidden among clouds.

The "cool, shaded rooms" and "safe beds" of the valley become too confining a space after the experience of "the immense canyon" ("spaces that couldn't hold us now, but vibrated outward without end"). The mountain offers its "granite lap" and even "has made a bed for us all." These may be comforting domestic images, but the mountain is also a place of danger where the child loses his way. The third section of "The Mountain" finally asks the question outright: "Where is home?" The mountain, with its grandeur and life-giving water and danger? Or the valley with its ample sustenance for human life and its flat confines? "The Mountain" ends with a hungry embrace of the valley's abundance, but with the mountain ever present. Janzen somehow must have both in sight, for her home must include both: the grace of the mountain's water, and the necessity of the valley's abundance. The endless paradox.

Perhaps it is the sense of paradox that keeps Janzen moving. For "Where is home?" is a profoundly theological question for her as well. Where is home for the nomads in "Claiming the Dust"—the new home in the valley dust or the final destination, that "different shore"? Where is home for mother and child in "In Tule Fog"—this world in time, into which one is birthed and one lives, or "that time, or no time, from which she came, to which we go"? The prominence of journey imagery and the theological conviction that this world is not our home means that Janzen is often working between the two poles of this world and the next, and in some ways never quite settles in either.

These three poems then embody several pairings in theological tension: permanence and transience, mutability and constancy, this world and the next, the tangible and the eternal. The interrelation of things and the tension between polarities are themes often present in Janzen's work.¹⁰ This vision of life lived out between polarities or within

10. Several of Janzen's manuscript titles bear out this notion: *Words for the Silence*, *The*

paradoxes keeps Janzen on the journey, between valley and mountain, day and night, earth and sky, this time and no time, this world and the next. She thereby reflects a fundamental conviction of the Christian faith, that truth comes in paradox: divinity and humanity, transcendence and immanence, sovereignty and free will, righteousness and forgiveness, the now and the not yet.

Upside-Down Tree, Snake in the Parsonage. Specific poems include "The Chalk Mountains" (*Words for the Silence*); "The Temperature of Cruelty," "Red," "Solo," (*Three Mennonite Poets*); "Double Rail," "Vermeer Had It Right," "River" (*The Upside-Down Tree*); "Going West," "Flash Flood" (*Snake in the Parsonage*).